VIRGIL IN MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

Figuring the Aeneid *from the twelfth century to Chaucer*

CHRISTOPHER BASWELL

Associate Professor of English
Barnard College, New York

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INTRODUCTION

Manuscripts and their contexts

From the moment of its writing, Virgil's *Aeneid* has evoked a ceaseless dialogue in western culture. His epic records a preeminent story of racial movement and imperial foundation in the Mediterranean, from Troy to Rome. From that story, be it considered myth or history, dynasties and empires across Europe and the New World have drawn their models, their genealogies, their justifications for two millennia. But this only begins the impact of Virgil and of his epic. Patronized by the Emperor Augustus, Virgil was quickly revered as a master of Latin style in a culture where elegant Latinity was a gateway to political power. The classroom study of Virgil elucidated, and often generated, a density of recondite learning within the *Aeneid* that only expanded as the centuries passed. Virgil's story, his style, and his learning all become part of the dialogue – sometimes the debate – that at once enacts, challenges, and extends his prestige in later European civilization.

This is a book about books, about manuscripts of Virgil and particularly their margins as a crucial site of cultural contest and cultural recreation. In turn, it is a book about vernacular retellings of the *Aeneid* that are the products and extensions of these readerly dialogues in the Virgilian margin. My investigation centers on a particularly rich era in this ongoing dialogue: the high and later Middle Ages in Anglo-Norman and English culture. This period and place begin with the emergence of a new European empire in the reign of Henry II, explicitly connected by genealogy and emulation to the people of the *Aeneid*; and it ends with a new language, English, challenging the prestige and power of Latin, and doing so in subtle contest with Virgil, as later chapters will show. Many of the book's arguments are applicable, moreover, to Virgilian reading and redaction across Europe; and I will claim, in a closing "Envoi," that the Virgilian debate of the Middle Ages extends its terms to vernacular writers of the English Renaissance.

As an epic narrator, a model of Latin style, a master of obscure learning, even as an adept of religious arcana, Virgil was uncontested from late antiquity onward. What did become a matter of contest was which of these qualities should predominate in any reading and interpretation of the *Aeneid.* Connected to this variable emphasis within the learned tradition was the variety of audiences laying claim to Virgil's cultural prestige, his approbation of empire, and the power of his language. These audiences compete within and across periods: clerics or laymen, men or women, aristocrats or townspeople. Manuscripts of the *Aeneid* record the moment and setting of their creation, of course, but equally important, their marginal annotations and other added material record their use across centuries and the modes or classes of readership the manuscripts encountered in their own cultural journeys. Vernacular retellings in turn inherit the themes and, to some extent, the qualities of dialogue inherent in the Latin marginalia; more importantly, they mark the movement of Virgilian prestige into new, less Latinate hands.

Beyond the dense record of its manuscript margins and the explosive moment of crossing into the vernacular, Virgil's *Aeneid* was part of two other kinds of ongoing contest, both of which need to be considered at the outset. First, any pagan writer, but especially a pagan writer who dealt with the gods, had to be the object of ambivalence in a Christian world. This ambivalence was only the more intense in regard to Virgil because of his stylistic prestige in what remained a Latin culture. Second, whatever his eloquence, Virgil told lies, about the gods and about history. Even while its cultural and linguistic cachet remained undimmed, there grew up around the *Aeneid* a constellation of counter-traditions, some dealing with its paganism, and others offering alternate stories of Troy and Rome. Chapter 1 surveys some of these counter-traditions, as they at once contest and thereby acknowledge the authority of Virgil. From this perspective, these alternate approaches are themselves marginal contests.

The ambivalent rejection and reverence of the *Aeneid* so deeply ramify Christian Latin culture that they defy survey. Two opening anecdotes, though, may suggest the range of reaction. Both stories typify points of ambivalent reverence toward the figure of Virgil in their time – points that stand constantly, though in the distance, behind the multiple English Virgilianisms explored in the following chapters.

The first story is from the twelfth century, and comes not from

England, but from its Norman milieu, in a manuscript originally from the monastery of Aulne in Belgium.[1] The manuscript contains a miscellaneous collection of monastic texts, among them the cautionary tale of two clerks, great friends and dangerously eager in the study of pagan literature. One dies, and as he had promised on his deathbed, returns as a spirit – "a cinder-like shadow" – to visit his friend. The dead man explains that he is in hell because, although he had confessed and taken the eucharist before his death, he had done so unwillingly. The surviving master is singularly unsympathetic. Instead, he wants to know if his dead friend has met Virgil. He has: "Alas! Wretch that I am, I see and know him and he is with me in suffering, because I always frivolously lingered with him among his tales of nonsense."[2] The survivor is delighted with this news, and insists that his friend go back to Virgil and ask what was meant in two particular verses. The spirit agrees. But in leaving he places a single drop of his sweat on his friend's brow, to give some infinitesimal sense of the pains of hell. This burns through to the survivor's very bones; he is in agony. Finally the spirit returns and tells him to wash the wound in holy water.

> But the master asked what Virgil had answered, to which the dead man responded, "When I asked him about what you had imposed on me, Virgil said, 'How stupid you and your questions are!' And know this for certain: unless you renounce the tales of the *auctores* and the frivolities of the liberal arts, and cling fast to evangelical truth, sooner than you hope you will endure with him the ruin of eternal perdition."[3]

The surviving master is restored by the holy water, and duly renounces the world.

Leclercq, who discovered and edited this story, speaks of its twofold injunction: to stop reading the poets and to enter the religious life. But the text contains an arresting irony. For the apparition is based in some detail on an episode in the very text it rejects: *Aeneid* 2, when the dead Hector appears to his comrade Aeneas and warns him to flee the burning of Troy (2.268–97). Hector too appears in a dark and frightening aspect. Like the monastic spirit, Hector's first sound is a great sigh. Both apparitions end by warning the living men to flee from the certain death (and fire) of their present circumstances, and to save themselves by embracing their deity. The monk must cling to evangelical truth; Aeneas must seize the Trojan gods as the partners and protectors of his fate. And in a less exact way, practically any

report of a descent to hell must bring Virgil to a medieval reader's mind.

This seems an almost perfect example of Virgil's profound but vexatious hold over the medieval Christian imagination. An explicit rejection of pagan literary interests is inextricably bound, by language and associations, to a famous Virgilian episode. Whatever their theoretical hostility to the moral impact of pagan literature, medieval writers of Latin are tied to its greatest antique exponent, and their literary imagination inescapably draws from him. Trying to dismiss Virgil in Latin is, almost unavoidably, like trying to use words to enjoin silence.[4]

The second Virgilian anecdote comes from England, in a passage from the early thirteenth-century *Ars Poetica* by Gervase of Melkley.[5] Gervase is speaking about the rhetorical figure *antonomasia*, the use of an epithet in place of a proper noun. "This usage must always denote a certain preeminence, as in this case: one says 'The Apostle,' that is to say, Paul; 'The Poet,' that is to say, Virgil."[6] This brief, apparently casual reference is intriguing for its collocation of Virgil and St. Paul, two preeminent models of eloquence named here in the context of teaching the simpler mechanics of that eloquence. Gervase's reference, further, evokes the context of rhetorical and poetic pedagogy which we will encounter repeatedly in the annotation of Virgil throughout the Middle Ages.

The medieval connection of scriptural and Roman authors is not merely rhetorical, however. The same association elsewhere recalls a profound uncertainty as to whether Virgil is not just an instance of imitable verbal power, but also a source of historical truth. In the allegorical vision which opens the fourteenth-century *Scalacronica* by Sir Thomas Gray of Heaton, Sir Thomas dreams of a ladder whose uprights rise from two books. A Sibyl explains to him that one is the Bible, the other is the Troy story, and that the ladder's steps are the eras of history.[7] Yet this passage, like Gervase's reference, is symptomatic of implicit and widespread tensions in the reception of the *Aeneid*, between the continued evocative power of Virgil's pagan narrative ("*the* poet," and the leading secular historian of Sir Thomas's Troy) on the one hand, and on the other hand efforts to use the language taught through Virgil as a transparent medium and methodology in the service of Christian rhetoric.

Virgil's book – whether it is the central object of basic classroom study, of monkish fascination, or the foundation text for the worldly

empires of Sir Thomas Gray's history – remains an almost irresistible model. Interpretation, imitation, alteration, and even rejection of that book are inevitably carried out in its own terms and often in the setting of its own stories. Whether acknowledging Virgil's centrality or challenging his truth and his faith, medieval writers repeatedly if unwillingly and even unconsciously find themselves writing in his margins. It is to such margins, literal and metaphorical, that this book addresses itself.

Two other books of Virgil, his *Eclogues* and *Georgics*, are left aside in what follows. While frequently accompanying the *Aeneid* in manuscripts of his works, the *Eclogues* and *Georgics* were less read than the *Aeneid* in medieval England.[8] The *Eclogues* did have a vital tradition, but were most actively read and annotated in collections and situations separate from the epic of Rome.[9] The *Georgics*, while not a rare text, were still less frequently read; indeed even in complete manuscripts of Virgil, the pages containing the *Georgics* remain the cleanest and least damaged, a testimony to their relative neglect.[10] For all their prestige and importance, neither of the earlier works had the topical appeal or the combination of stylistic model and ethnic history, that medieval European readers encountered in the *Aeneid*.

MANUSCRIPTS AND THEIR CONTEXTS

Especially in the examination of Latin tradition, but also when the book turns to vernacular retellings of the *Aeneid*, I will approach my material largely through its manuscripts – the specific codex with its many signs and inscriptions beyond the original central text, and with its own archeology resulting, often, from centuries of changing use. Indeed, I will argue that the challenge of the book itself comes to rival the Trojan narrative as a model for heroic vision and action in the later medieval Virgil.

A study of medieval English Virgilianism through its manuscripts can help us suspend certain assumptions about textuality and its boundaries, and in particular, our tendency to distinguish between the book (the concrete, historical, local manifestation of a work of literature) and its text (that abstract, finally theoretical phenomenon in which we imagine an author's original words, even an author's "intention"). This kind of distinction had only a limited role in the intellectual activities of medieval readers.[11] In fact, a conjunction of book and text – or at least an unstable frontier between them – is

suggested by the tendency among medieval translators to include not only the "primary" text, but also parts of its surrounding commentaries. For instance, in the *Roman d'Eneas*, the translator seems to be responding to a widely found marginal note in his decision to tell the story of the Judgment of Paris.[12] We will return in chapter 5 to other codicological influences on the structure and detail of this romance. Much better known is the example of Chaucer, whose *Boece* unites Latin text and gloss, as well as French.[13] This absorption of framing materials into the translation – the insistent centripetal movement of the margins toward the center – suggests the extent to which textuality in the Middle Ages has vague and fluid limits, only beginning with the *auctor*'s words, and not necessarily ending even with the book itself.[14]

At the same time, by concentrating on manuscripts, with all their texts and other signs, as central transmitters of medieval Virgilianism, it should be easier to acknowledge the many agents beyond authorial intention that participate in the production of meaning. In a codicological setting where text and commentary form a functional whole, an original text is inevitably extended at each stage of annotation to include the intentions of its readers. As the *Pearl*-Poet says, it is the book which speaks: "The bok as I herde say..."[15] In such a phrase, the implied source of meaning resides in the concrete if ever-shifting phenomenon, the *codex*, far more than in some absent, personal *auctor*, or his originally intended text.

In the tradition of school introductions (*accessus*) to the works of Virgil, authorial intention is indeed regularly mentioned, but it is most often biographical rather than literary or ethical. In the most important allegorical commentary of the Middle Ages, Virgil is said to have praised Aeneas's acts "so that he might earn the favor of Augustus."[16] The same commentator says that Virgil also "taught the truth of philosophy,"[17] but the problem of intentional meaning is left behind when the allegorical interpretation actually begins.[18]

Even more important, an approach through the manuscripts, and using the resources of codicology, will encourage a recovery of the medieval *Aeneid* not as a monolithic entity, but as a series of historical phenomena, individual concrete events whose meanings are indeed conditioned by the language of the text, but simultaneously by an elaborate matrix of annotative and sometimes visual reinscription on the page. This in turn reflects the shifting institutional and historical situation of the book. Medieval schoolbooks record not just the efforts of their original scribes, but also those of ensuing generations of

reader/writers who inscribe their own difficulties and responses – and those of their masters – between the lines and in the margins. These books, with their multiplying layers of annotation, become new and altered wholes to be encountered or resisted by yet another generation of reader/writers, until the codex wears out or is put aside in favor of a fresher copy or alternate tradition of exegesis.

But the readerly experience produced by the more heavily annotated medieval codices is not always one of comfortable acceptance. The redactor of the *Roman d'Eneas* selects with self-conscious wit from the learned material that accompanied twelfth-century study of the *Aeneid*. Readers of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance sometimes reject the encrustation of annotations in the most overt fashion, by erasing some of them.[19] Other readers respond with real anguish to the excess of multiple and at times conflicting senses that so intimately, even inextricably, accumulate around the *auctores*. Both Chaucer and Douglas will claim to escape these conflicting, even excessive senses, and offer instead what Chaucer calls a "naked text." But as we will see, this claim is subverted in the shifting responses of Chaucer's narrator. And in Douglas the text is presented nakedly only by being framed with Prologues as multiple and varied as anything in the codicological tradition.

Through such an approach, then, taking account where possible of the changing historical and institutional setting of these manuscripts, we can see them as potential sites of contest between conflicting readerly groups, preoccupations, and demands. Any text as central to cultural and political self-conception as was the medieval *Aeneid* will have competing claims laid upon it; and the contested control of the epic – a battle fought in the margins and redactions studied here – takes on implications that are themselves cultural and political. Different readerly settings will inscribe around the *Aeneid* conflicting models of imitation (allegorical and spiritual, historical and political) and conflicting narrative emphases (academic, moral, erotic, imperial, genealogical).

Manuscripts, the protean forms they present and the commentaries they bear, however, provide no instant or final key to the past of the past. They are not, and must not be misunderstood as, some irreducible datum; and however comforting such an idea may be to our positivist nostalgia, attention to them will not generate the true, direct, empirical "medieval reading of Virgil." Manuscripts too must be interpreted; some past reading must be inferred from them, and any

such scholarly alchemy will deform the moment it seeks, even as it reconstitutes that moment. There are, moreover, many alternate manifestations, beyond manuscripts and the archeology of their inscribed readings, of the multiple medieval Virgilianisms I hope to describe in this book. The bulk of chapter 1 will suggest the variety and impact of the Virgils that can be said to exist even in the *absence* of full textual access: library records, anthologies, prose summaries, citations in school texts, illustrations. Manuscripts do provide the most intensive local record of specific acts of reading, then, but these in turn must be understood in the context of that yet greater range of ideas and materials allowed by the wide limits of medieval notions of literary and interpretive relevance.[20]

Chapters 2 through 4 focus on the progressive encrustation of marginalia and separate commentaries in just three richly annotated manuscripts originating in twelfth-century England. Each of these, I will argue, typifies a major strand – respectively pedagogical, allegorical, and moral – in the multiple approaches practiced upon the *Aeneid* in the high and later Middle Ages in England, and elsewhere in Europe. While these dominant approaches will best emerge from discussion of the manuscripts themselves, I begin (pp. 9–14) by sketching their broad outlines, and that of yet a further, "romance" claim on the *Aeneid* that emerges in the early vernacular redactions.

In these chapters I am interested in exactly those English manuscripts of Virgil which represent traditions of reading equally available to Chaucer and the more learned (if perhaps quite limited) sectors of his audience; for this reason, when I turn to Chaucer's two retellings of the story in chapter 6, I take rather little account of Dante and the Italians, clear though it be that Chaucer himself was a profound reader of the *Divine Comedy* and its Virgilianism. I will also try, however, to take some account in later chapters of the impingement of more accessible, contemporary forms of classical story, particularly in the vernacular.

The first of the tasks I have outlined above – that of establishing the specific contours of the medieval reading of the Latin *text* as it survives in specific manuscripts – is still in its early stages, for Virgil or any of the major Latin *auctores*, anywhere during the high and later Middle Ages. Textual critics of Virgil and Servius have not needed to look past the manuscripts of the Carolingian period.[21] Students of the Renaissance have only just begun the study of the Virgil manuscripts and commentaries of their own period.[22] Only the *Dantisti* have made significant use of medieval Virgil manuscripts as sources of literary

context, and their studies have naturally been limited to Italian materials.[23]

We must begin, then, not with "the state of the question," but with the state of our ignorance. The difficulties of access to medieval acts of classical reading are great, and remain (as they will remain) incompletely resolved. Scholarship has only recently begun seriously undertaking to recover and use the medieval past's own ancient books. Most of the material, much of it genuinely important, is unedited, and the full contents of manuscripts more often than not remain unknown. Older catalogs and handlists are usually of little use in seeking out independent commentaries, and provide even less information about material in the margins surrounding classical texts.[24]

Who in the Middle Ages was reading classical Latin texts, which ones, when, and where? Until a very few years ago we did not really know, in any statistical sense, at all. The evidence was spotty and local, and in great part indirect, a question of echoes and literary references.[25] A tool as basic as a survey of surviving manuscripts, however, used cautiously, can provide some real answers ("cautiously," because the survival of a manuscript can suggest precisely that it *ceased* to be used, or at least was used less often and hence less destructively). Just such a survey has now appeared thanks to the Herculean labors of Birger Munk Olsen.[26] Simply by listing and dating surviving manuscripts of Latin classical authors through the end of the twelfth century, with a certain amount of bibliography and peripheral information added, Munk Olsen gives us for the first time a solid notion of what works were being copied at what times, and often he can tell us where, as well.[27] I make constant use of Munk Olsen and related surveys in the pages that follow, and I provide information on surviving English manuscripts of Virgil and continental manuscripts brought to England during the Middle Ages, in Appendix I.

THREE DOMINANT VISIONS OF THE *AENEID*

In the medieval manuscripts and redactions of the *Aeneid*, three major trends of interpretation can be distinguished. They merge, divide, and recross throughout the period, but their identities are sufficiently clear to be useful. I will be calling these streams of interpretation the allegorical, romance, and pedagogical visions of the *Aeneid*.

Our received understanding of classical tradition generally, and of Virgil specifically, in the high and later Middle Ages has derived to a

great extent from generalizations based on a rich but incompletely studied range of materials.[28] This scholarly orthodoxy has tended to concentrate on two strands of medieval classicism, both of which could be called "domesticating" interpretations. First, work on the learned tradition has focussed on allegorical interpretations, either the spiritual and learned allegories characterized by the Virgil commentary associated with Bernard Silvestris and by another on the *Metamorphoses* by Arnulf of Orléans, or the later moralizing and ethical allegories of Pierre Bersuire and the *Ovide moralisé*.[29] In what follows, I will be describing this as the "allegorizing" vision.

This style of commentary bases itself loosely on the late-antique allegorization by Fulgentius, and interprets the books of the *Aeneid* as stages in the spiritual life of man. The shipwreck of Book One is birth, the hunting and sexual involvement of Book Four are voluptuous adolescence. The descent to hell of Book Six is the centerpiece of this interpretation, since it is here that man achieves spiritual adulthood, descending to an enlightened knowledge of creation below so that he may understand the Creator above. Such an adaptation of the epic to new values and preoccupations allows further development of the already well-established notion that Virgil had hidden vast funds of recondite learning in his text. In the allegorizations of the twelfth century, Aeneas's spiritual development was linked to a more specific educational progress in the liberal arts, capped by a sort of second birth in Book Six. Chapter 3 explores an English manuscript dominated by such an approach. Later developments in the tradition were influenced by the moralizing allegories around Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Such allegorical annotation dealt with Virgil's epic by an analogous process of fragmentation, concentrating on brief episodes and interpreting them as signs of moral flaws or virtues, or moments in Christian history. Chapter 4 is devoted to a fourteenth-century commentary in this tradition.

Work in vernacular classicism and its accompanying illustrations has demonstrated how classical story in romances and universal histories shifts the imagined world of the antique past – costume, architecture, social codes – into the time and place of the medieval redactor, even (to varying extents) suppressing the apparatus of pagan divinity and mythology; I am calling this the "romance" vision of the *Aeneid*.[30] The "romance" vision is expressed primarily in a linked, though also evolving, sequence of vernacular redactions of the Dido-and-Aeneas story, with only occasional (though repeated) recourse to the Latin text and its commentaries for fresh matter or detail. The romance vision of

Virgil is essentially vernacular, not Latinate, although in chapter 5, along with the *Eneas*, I will discuss some Latin poems where its preoccupations also operate.

This tradition is inextricably connected to the popular vernacular histories produced from the twelfth century and through the Renaissance. Some versions are independent works, like the *Roman d'Eneas*; but this text is often found in manuscripts in the company of other *romans antiques* or the *Brut*, which implicitly renders it part of a continuing Anglo-Norman history. Such an insertion of the story into a wider project of English imperial history invites political imitation, and creates a justifying prehistory for the Angevin line and its empire. The *Eneas* contributed to the prose *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César*, which in turn influenced a later independent work, the *Livre des Eneydes*.[31] The romance *Aeneid*, far more than in its Latin source, is the story of Aeneas and his women, or even the story of Aeneas's women to the exclusion of Aeneas. As I will argue later, it can be seen as the untold Latin *Aeneid*: a completion, but also a subversion of Virgil's narrative, tending to extend those very episodes, especially that of Dido, which for Virgil are the restraints keeping Aeneas from his fortune in Italy.

These two Virgilianisms – one learned and recondite, the other more popular and accessible – may seem very different. But they have in common a will to make Virgilian authority more immediately accessible and relevant to their contemporary world, be it spiritual or secular, moral or imperial. Both approaches, it could be argued, to some extent domesticate and thus subvert that very alterity, historical or linguistic, in which much of the *auctor*'s power resides, and in particular both traditions evade (by interpretation or suppression) those elements which, since patristic times, had seemed most threatening to a Christian readership – the gods and the miraculous.

This generalization is open to several kinds of qualification, though. In particular, I will argue that both these traditions do not always so much *subvert* the mystery of Virgil's historical, mythological, and geographical difference, as they *replace* it with alternate but still functional wonders. The *Eneas*, for instance, as Poirion has best pointed out, replaces the pagan *mirabilia* of the Latin *Aeneid* with scientific and architectural wonders.[32] And this insight could be applied to the allegories of the *Aeneid* in terms of their exploration of spiritual and moral mysteries.

While this long-established focus on the dual domestication of the classical past has real validity, it must, I think, be seen in the context of

a third, far more widespread habit of reading, based in the schools, which approaches classical Latin texts grammatically and rhetorically, and attempts to read them in a fashion that in some ways acknowledges and restores their historical and religious difference, rather than effacing it. That is, these readings respect the verbal integrity and imitability of the texts, yet attempt to reconstruct, within restricted scholarly limits, their historical, social, and geographical difference. I will be calling this third and most widespread appproach the "pedagogical" vision of Virgil.

Classical allegoresis, we have tended to assume, is motivated by a need among medieval readers to adapt the works to their own times, to reread them exclusively in terms of their own, Christian ethos. This kind of assumption participates in the more general truism, now increasingly challenged, that the Middle Ages lacked a developed historical imagination.[33] But the commentaries I study in chapter 2, and the earlier layers of marginalia described in chapters 3 and 4, despite their often very elementary level, show a real effort to explain Virgil in terms of what they could reconstruct of his own world – verbal, historical, mythological, and political. These pedagogical annotations work through a sustained use of the universally available commentary of Servius, but import their own independent rhetorical analyses, and turn, especially in the later Middle Ages, to independent sources of information about the antique world.

The pedagogical vision is found largely in commentaries of the schools, though, and probably the lower schools; it represents only one context and level of Virgilian reading, though the most widespread, and is not necessarily inconsistent with the more sophisticated allegorical interpretations proposed in the same periods. Indeed, the medieval model of biblical reading in the schools, with its typical move from literal sense to allegorical interpretation, provides a context in which we can see the pedagogical and allegorical *Aeneids* as parts of a continuing clerical approach to ancient epic. But at the same time, both the inherited prestige and the literal narrative of the *Aeneid* lent themselves as models of secular power and imperial ambition far different from, if not immediately opposed to, clerical efforts to use the epic as a colorless training ground for Latin eloquence and an allegorized tale of spiritual education. What is the implication if a pedagogically annotated manuscript is read not by a monk, but by a prince? I will suggest that this may have been the case with the manuscript I study in chapter 2. Even in its own time, then, a single